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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON HMONG-AMERICANS TAKEN INTO POLICE CUSTODY IN LAOS

REF: A) VIENTIANE 698 B) SWEENEY-SCHWARTZ EMAIL OF 09/14/2007

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Post continues to investigate the whereabouts of the three Hmong Americans who were taken into police custody on August 25. Both Lao and Thai immigration authorities have records indicating that the Americans departed Laos on August 29. During a trip to Xiengkhouang Province September 10-12, Conoff and RSO met with the provincial police commander and interviewed the owner and staff of the guesthouse where the men were taken into custody. The guesthouse staff positively identified the three men and provided details of their arrest. The police commander and other provincial security officials consistently denied that any U.S. citizens were arrested, while claiming a drug bust had occurred in Xiengkhouang on August 25 in which some Lao Hmong men were arrested. During a routine prison visit in Vientiane, a U.S. citizen prisoner stated that three Hmong-American men had arrived at the prison on August 26 and left on August 28. Post continues to receive inquiries from next of kin, the press, and Congressional offices asking for updates. END SUMMARY.

Inquiry on Events in Xieng Khouang

¶2. (SBU) On September 10, Conoff, RSO and Consular LES met with the owner and two employees of the Number 5 Guesthouse in Phonesavanh, Xiengkhouang Province. The guesthouse, where the three men were reported to have stayed, is run by a Lao Hmong family and caters to ethnic Hmong. Both of the employees, one of whom is the guesthouse owner's son, positively identified photos of the three men. The employees stated that the three men checked into the guesthouse on August 23. After they checked out on August 25, a silver Toyota van pulled up and the men got in. As the van was pulling out of the front gate of the guesthouse compound, it was surrounded by unmarked vehicles and men in civilian clothes who took the men away. The son of the guesthouse owner went out to see what was going on and was then taken into custody. He was later taken in a separate vehicle to the Xiengkhouang Ministry of Public Security (MOPS) compound a short distance away and held for two days. He stated he never saw the Hmong Americans in the jail. The son was released on August 27 after being cleared of any charges. He said he was never told why he was detained. The employees said that they use a registration book to record the names and passport numbers of any foreigners who stay at the guesthouse. They stated that they recorded the name and passport number of Trillion Yunhaison after he checked in with the other two U.S. citizens and paid for three rooms for the group. They said the police came and took the registration book from the guesthouse on August 25 after the three Hmong-Americans were taken into custody. The guesthouse owner said he had subsequently asked for it back but it had not yet been returned.

¶ 3. (SBU) In a meeting on September 11, the Commander of MOPS for Xiengkhouang Province refused to acknowledge that any U.S. citizens had been taken into custody and proceeded to explain that on August 25 a drug raid took place in Phonesavanh against known opium and methamphetamine users and dealers. He said that some had escaped and fled to the No. 5 guesthouse, where they were arrested. When Conoff showed him photos of the U.S. citizens, he claimed none of them were among those arrested. (Note: Post's DEA office reports that none of their contacts in Xiengkhouang had heard of any recent drug arrests in the province. End note.) When asked if Conoff could see the guesthouse registration book, the Commander stated that it was being held by the Xiengkhouang Tourist Police and that he would contact that office the next day to obtain it. When Conoff returned to his office the next day, the Commander's secretary stated he was in a meeting and that the registration book was with the guesthouse. The rest of the morning was spent talking with MOPS officials from the Tourist Police and the Xiengkhouang Immigration office, all of whom stated that they had the registration book at some time recently but could either not locate it or claimed it had been returned to the guesthouse. Embassy officers repeatedly asked MOPS officials to call the guesthouse to confirm that they indeed did not have the missing book. In the end, the book was never seen by Embassy officers.

Travel Records

¶ 4. (SBU) On September 12, Lao Immigration officials at the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge just outside Vientiane told the Consular Section that all three men had departed Laos for Nongkhai, Thailand on August 29. Post has requested official written confirmation of these departures, including a printout of the departure records, and has requested permission to see the originals. On September 14, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) informed the embassy by phone that an official written reply had been sent via diplomatic note to the Embassy, but the Embassy had not received it by close of business

¶ 5. (SBU) On September 13, Thai Immigration officials in Nongkhai, at the request of Embassy Bangkok, provided copies of arrival cards for the three men stamped August 29. Vientiane has provided NOK and other biodata information to ACS Bangkok for assistance in opening welfare/whereabouts cases for the three men.

¶ 6. (SBU) Vientiane's Consular Section confirmed that neither Hakit nor Congshineng Yang boarded their scheduled flights from Vientiane to Bangkok, reserved for September 8 or their on-going flights from Bangkok to Minneapolis for September 9. RSO confirmed with DS that none of the three have used their passports to enter the U.S. since their last departure. The spouse of Hakit Yang, Ms. Sheng Xiong, told the Consular Chief on September 13 that Hakit called her nearly every day from his arrival in Laos on July 12 until August 24, the last day that she talked with him. She stated the other two men had much less frequent phone contact with their relatives in Minnesota. She repeated that neither she nor any other relatives that she knows have been contacted by any of them since they were taken into custody.

American Prisoner Reports Seeing Three Hmong-Americans

¶ 7. (SBU) During a routine visit to Phon Tong prison in Vientiane, where two U.S. citizen prisoners are detained, one of the prisoners asked about "the three Hmong Americans". Without stating names, the prisoner then said that the three had arrived at the prison on August 26 accompanied by police. They were then moved out of the prison by what he claimed were Army personnel on August 28, apparently in a very sudden fashion while the three were in the middle of bathing. They were taken out of the prison wearing only shorts and shoes, blindfolded, and put in the back of a vehicle. He further stated that he had learned that they were arrested with three to four Lao Hmong men, reportedly for "doing something in the jungle". The prisoner stated that they were in good condition and had not been tortured. Because the prison warden was present in the room with a prison guard, the visiting Conoff did not show the photos of the three men to the prisoner or press for more information out of concern for the safety of the prisoner.

¶8. (SBU) Post will continue to investigate the reported departure of these three men by asking for complete immigration records from the Lao and coordinate with Embassy Bangkok in their efforts to find the three men in Thailand. Post will refer any further press inquiries to CA.

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